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SUBJECT: POWER STRUGGLE IN LITTLE LHASA: TIBETAN GOVERNMENT-IN-EXILE BEGINS JOCKEYING FOR POST-DALAI LAMA CONTROL

REF: A. 08 NEW DELHI 2884

[B.](#) 09 NEW DELHI 863

Classified By: Acting Polcouns Les Viguerie for Reasons 1.4 (B and D)

[¶](#)1. (C) SUMMARY. The battle for control over the Tibetan Government-in-Exile (TGIE) has begun in Dharamsala, India. As the Dalai Lama turned 74 years old on July 7, Tibet watchers reiterated that the most volatile times in Tibetan politics usually occur around the time of a Dalai Lama's death. The Dalai Lama recently underscored the importance of separating the spiritual and secular heads of the Tibetan movement, meaning elevating the role of the Prime Minister-in-exile, or Kalon Tripa. The current Kalon Tripa, Professor Samdhong Rinpoche, draws support from the dominant sect of Tibetan Buddhism, the Dalai Lama's inner circle and family, the Indian security establishment, and the average Tibetan exile in India. However, a competing camp led by Parliamentarian-in-exile Karma Choepel, who advocates Tibetan independence, has emerged to challenge Rinpoche's position and strategy toward Beijing. The drama between the competing groups came to a head in May when Rinpoche offered to resign mid-way through his second term in office. Weeks later, Rinpoche told reporters the Dalai Lama ultimately declined the offer. Dharamsala buzzed with rumors about Rinpoche's motivations, ranging from his desire to encourage Tibetan youth to run for the position to concerns about his health. Some Tibet watchers believe his resignation offer was a savvy political move by Rinpoche to silence Choepel and other critics by eliciting the Dalai Lama's public endorsement.

[¶](#)2. (C) SUMMARY CONTINUED. The Dalai Lama rejected Rinpoche's offer in the lead up to the 19th Task Force Meeting, chaired by Rinpoche. The Task Force debated the TGIE's next move in the frozen dialogue with the PRC and began drafting a clarification note to address the PRC's concerns about the genuine memorandum of autonomy presented during the last round of negotiations in October 2008. Task Force members are considering sending envoys to deliver the note, thus resuming the dialogue process. END SUMMARY.

The Jockeying Begins

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[¶](#)3. (C) Tibetans have begun jockeying for power in the post-Dalai Lama Tibetan Government in Exile (TGIE), headquartered in the Indian hill station town of Dharamsala. Prior to the Dalai Lama's visit to the U.S. last May, the Prime Minister-in-exile (Kalon Tripa) Professor Samdhong Rinpoche offered to resign and initiate mid-term polls for his successor. Rinpoche, the first directly elected Prime Minister of the TGIE, is scheduled to complete his second term in August 2011 (Ref. B). In statements to the media he

declared it was time to transfer leadership to the younger generation. Representative of the Dalai Lama in New Delhi Tempa Tsering said that health concerns were the true motivation behind Rinpoche's offer, but confided to Poloff that Rinpoche's ailments were "not that serious."

¶4. (C) Contacts offered a third explanation for the public offer of resignation. According to trusted human rights contact Ravi Nair of the South Asian Human Rights Documentation Center, two competing groups have emerged in Dharamsala. Rinpoche leads one group, which includes the Dalai Lama's relatives and members of the inner circle, such as the Dalai Lama's Representative in the U.S., Lodi Gyari. Rinpoche's groups also draws support from a significant number of Parliamentarians-in-exile, the Indian security establishment, and "common" Tibetan exiles across India.

¶5. (C) Karma Choepel, former Speaker of the Parliament-in-exile and current member, leads the other group. Choepel served as President of the influential Tibetan Youth Congress (TYC) in the 1980s and co-founded the National Democratic Party of Tibet. During several speeches over the last decade, Choepel has advocated for Tibet's complete independence, arguing independence "is something which we had and we lost." His public statements accusing the Dalai Lama's Middle Way approach of weakening the Tibetan movement earned him a "knocking on the head" by TGIE leaders and the adoration of the TYC and other pro-independence groups. Nair told Poloff that Choepel has successfully built a "rainbow coalition" of various groups, including other Buddhist sects and the educated Tibetan lay community, who oppose Rinpoche's

NEW DELHI 00001487 002 OF 003

closed style. TYC's Vice President Dhondup Dorjee conveyed that Choepel's group delivered a letter to the Dalai Lama last fall, criticizing Rinpoche's strategy for engaging Beijing. Choepel alleged Rinpoche's process for selecting envoys to send to Beijing was not transparent and his agricultural and education reforms have been ineffective.

Regency Rumbles

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¶6. (C) Tibet watchers claim Rinpoche offered to resign as part of a shrewd political gamble. According to Nair, Rinpoche realizes that challenges to his authority are mounting after eight months of silence between the TGIE and Beijing. Rinpoche wagered that the Dalai Lama would prefer stability in the exile government and reject the offer, thus silencing his critics. His timing may have been motivated by the desire to "force" the Dalai Lama to make a decision on the Council of Regency, which would assume control of the government-in-exile after the Dalai Lama's death (Ref B). Nair and others believe the Dalai Lama would amend the TGIE charter regulations governing the formation of the Council of Regency to reflect his current views on the most appropriate members. Both groups fear the Dalai Lama is on his "last leg" and hope he makes the decision while he remains relatively healthy.

¶7. (C) Both Rinpoche and Choepel are vying for the top position on the Council. TYC believes the Dalai Lama considered appointing the Karmapa, the young dynamic leader of the Kagyu sect, to the position as a neutral alternative (Ref B). Rinpoche and other insiders quickly "shot down" the proposal. Non-Tibetan factors also worked against the Karmapa's candidacy. The Indian security establishment expressed "unease" with a Karmapa-led Tibetan movement, as the Karmapa was an "unknown quantity" groomed and educated in China until the age of 14. However, other elements of the Indian government, such as the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) would prefer a "more charismatic" Tibetan leader than Rinpoche. Nair commented MEA officials doubt the 69 year-old monk's diplomatic skills could effectively replace the Dalai Lama's on the international stage. MEA would prefer a figure like Lodi Gyari, the Dalai Lama's Special Envoy to the U.S.,

who has experience and contacts in many capitals.

¶18. (C) Columbia University's Robbie Barnett told Poloff that the "real" issue is the lack of credible candidates to replace Rinpoche, let alone handle the Dalai Lama succession issue. He blamed the leadership void on endemic issues, such as a lack of professional education and expertise among Tibetan exiles in India and the exile education system in India which fails to nurture individualism and creativity. According to Barnett, the stunted leadership development, the lack of quality higher education, limited financial opportunities all point to a "post-Dalai Lama vacuum" and general anxiety for the Tibetan exile community.

Clarification for Beijing

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¶19. (C) The Dalai Lama rejected Rinpoche's resignation offer on the eve of the 19th Task Force meeting. The TGIE established the Task Force, chaired by Rinpoche, in 1999 to advise the Dalai Lama's envoys before and after negotiation rounds with Beijing. Talks stalled after the eighth round in November 2008 when Tibetan envoys presented the "Memorandum on Genuine Autonomy for the Tibetan People," which detailed the TGIE's vision for an autonomous Tibet within the framework of the Chinese constitution. The Chinese summarily rejected the memorandum (Ref A). During two-days of meetings in Dharamsala in late June, the Task Force began drafting a "clarification note" to address specific PRC concerns about the proposal.

¶10. (C) The clarification note focuses on the question of population transfer and the definition of "Greater Tibet." Tempa Tsering denied PRC allegations that the TGIE advocates the transfer of Han Chinese out of Tibet. He prefers to frame the discussion of "Greater Tibet" in terms of population rather than land, noting only 40 percent of Tibetans in China reside in the Tibet Autonomous Region. The TGIE believes that it would be more efficient to have all the territories where Tibetans lived under one administration. Only this would preserve Tibetans' unique cultural and

NEW DELHI 00001487 003 OF 003

linguistic heritage. Additionally, Tsering blamed the PRC's unconstructive preconditions for stalled talks. The Dalai Lama believes "what's done cannot be undone" and he would not admit that Tibet had always been a part of China.

¶11. (C) Tsering disclosed that during the Task Force meeting there were "heated exchanges" regarding how to deliver the clarification note to the PRC. Tsering voted to send envoys to Beijing to discuss the document. Other proposals included sending a "middle man" or impartial third country representative to Beijing, but Tsering told Poloff these proposals were not popular. He explained that Rinpoche would be the final TGIE official to review the draft and the delivery plan before sending it to the Dalai Lama for review.

The Task Force did not establish a timeline for the process, but Tsering promised to send Poloff a copy of the clarification note after its approval. Tsering concluded the Tibetans had "put everything on the table" and were committed to substantive dialogue and the Middle Path, but "the ball is in their (the PRC's) court."

Comment: Rinpoche Scored One

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¶12. (C) Given the opaque nature of Tibetan exile politics, discerning Rinpoche's true motivation for offering to resign is difficult. Tibet watchers characterized Rinpoche as a shrewd politician; consequently, we would not be surprised if he orchestrated the public affirmation of his leadership at a crucial time. The Dalai Lama's rejection of the offer secured the stability of the TGIE leadership for the foreseeable future and prevented Choepel's group from mounting an effective challenge. However, if the Rinpoche's

clarification note to Beijing fails, Choepel may feel  
emboldened. END COMMENT.

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